

## School borrowing could double in five years

By JOHN TOMPKINS - MONROE

Future growth of the Union County Schools includes seven more schools by 2010, and an estimated price tag of \$235 million for proposed construction.

The Board of Education said at a Monday meeting with County Commissioners the task of tackling growth has been compounded by difficulty in finding land and unfunded mandates from Raleigh.

The school system points to rising building costs, more restrictive classroom sizes in early grades, and a growing population that has brought in more students this year than what was projected. Typical school system growth is around 1,500 students-- more than enough to fill an entire high school.

On the heels of a record-sized \$100 million bond, the Board of Education met with county commissioners to discuss the need for a \$49.5 million bond referendum for November 2. Along with the addition of five new gym complexes and five classrooms for each of the county's oldest high schools, the board is also requesting the funding for the new Wolfe School, the Central Academy of Technology and Arts, and the Professional Development Institute. Another \$6.7 million would be used to cover part of \$22 million in construction cost increases that hit quickly last year.

"I hope people understand just how important the Wolfe School is," said Dennis Layton, vice chairman of the Board of Education. "It's crucial they get the money. What is done at that school is so important."

The school system has proposed placing the remaining \$15 million of construction overages in a 2006 bond. How much bigger could the 2006 bond get? The combined estimated cost of the six proposed schools, four elementaries and a middle and high school, would be more than \$136.2 million. That number could end up being low, based on what happens with building materials, said Layton.

"These cost increases were before hurricane Charley," Layton said. "From what I saw when I was down there, the devastation was huge. Construction costs will skyrocket more."

Another \$5.6 million is in the Capital Improvement Plan to tear down the two-story structure at Benton Heights and replace it with a one-story classroom wing. Wesley Chapel Elementary is slated for an expansion of classrooms, cafeteria and library at a cost of \$4.1 million.

Administrative costs could find their way into a bond package, with the schools requesting satellite locations for transportation and maintenance, and the construction of an administrative building on the newly acquired Brewer Drive location. The satellite stations would cost \$4.9 million each, while the administrative offices would cost just over \$3.3 million.

Bond administration combined with planning and design of future schools is placed at \$3 million spread out over the next five years.

Other expenses the school system has placed into the CIP is \$3.5 million for more mobile unit classrooms, \$18.1 million in upgrades and renovations to existing buildings, and \$4.8 million for new buses and transportation costs.

County Commissioner Stony Rushing asked school board members if it would be beneficial to place a

sewer moratorium in the Weddington are to slow the growth.

"I'd be willing as a show of good faith to propose this if you think it would help," Rushing said to Tripp Helms, Board of Education chairman. "This is an emergency situation and something needs to be done that will help."

Helms replied that as long as the county would issue the permits, the board would continue to ask for bond moneys, but Helms added making such a decision was not in his power.

"Its pretty clearly in your province to make that decision," Helms said to Rushing. "We predict needs. That's a policy choice we are not supposed to make, and we won't make it."